Perspectives on Influence and its Role in Counterinsurgency Operations

By Dr. David Sloggett

Editorial Abstract: **Dr. Sloggett explores how influence operations can best be served by intelligence collected at the local levels. This article highlights the vital role of social anthropology in gaining insights into the structures of societies that provide the socio-cultural backdrop to our on-going operations in the 21st century. Understanding the historical and contemporary social fabric of indigenous societies is a sine qua non of delivering appropriate effects on the ground.**

[Part IV and final of a series on Intelligence and Information Operations]

Introduction

This is the final part of the series that considers how we need to shape our intelligence collection activities in the future, to most effectively deploy IO as part of the range of effects we wish to have on the battlefield. It pays particular attention to the issues that arise when conducting counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. Any concept of full spectrum dominance in a COIN context requires greater attention to detail of the social fabric that is the backdrop to our military operations—wherever they take place across the world. Therefore, developing a key awareness of the socio-anthropological backdrop is paramount, as is the need for military staffs that are at least versed in the subject, and its associated need for rigorous collection of relevant material and intelligence analysis.

This article argues that correctly segmenting societal structures and understanding the underlying socio-cultural and ethno-religious structures and influences are a vital part of conducting successful influence operations. Given the media backdrop against which such operations are conducted, and our adversaries' highly effective use of this to portray their view of the world, it is an area we cannot afford to cede to our enemies.

With the media portraying events on a continual basis worldwide, and with the power of the Internet to deliver images to global populations and their underlying societies within seconds, we face a delivery problem. How do we conduct influence operations against a backdrop where world opinion can be formulated quickly, and sometimes with a lack of what we might regard as 'rational behavior?'

Take the media's use of the Prophet Mohammad's image, and the near instantaneous world-wide reactions in the Muslim community. Through a purely western lens, some of the reaction may have been difficult to understand. From a Muslim perspective, with the clear offense caused by portraying images of the Prophet—the reaction was predictable. In developing influence operations that have more than marginal benefits, we must be capable of seeing the world through different lenses. Seeing through ours is easy—but seeing through those of our adversaries' is that much harder without setting an appropriate historical and cultural context. Such lenses also apply to those who may be on the fringes, or in the middle ground between of these two extremes. These people may be tempted to move one way or the other depending upon how events unfold. To date, this is an area in which it is fair to say we have fallen short in ensuring we successfully compete in the cognitive domain. These are essential elements of winning what is often

referred to as 'hearts and minds' of the population. Additionally, this is a vital component of leveraging a population away from supporting insurgents—one of the classic elements of a successful counterinsurgency campaign.

We therefore need greater sophistication in our approach. There must be coherence in its delivery across the strategic, operational and tactical domains. Developing detailed and highly granular local (tactical) understanding must be our intent. This gives us the best chance of success, of moving a campaign forward incrementally, and of avoiding major setbacks.

Historical Viewpoint

Commentators have characterized the Cold War as a clash of two major blocs, NATO and the Soviet Union with their associated ideologies of the free market and communism. Blocs achieved influence through deterrence, and the ultimate threat of a global conflict involving nuclear weapons. This scenario could escalate quickly, and the need to develop confidence building measures were part of what might be called a conflict management (avoidance) strategy.

Given the potential for such serious global consequences, it is understandable that we paid little attention to underlying social structures: you were either in the West or part of the Soviet bloc. The two super-powers governed and influenced the world, often using localized and

regional conflicts in Africa, Latin America and the Far East as proxies. Warfighting was part of holding the line, preventing the spread of communism without resorting to actual combat between the two. Understanding local tribal and clan structures in these proxy wars was not a specific focus, as the underlying societal structures were homogeneous.

Nevertheless, proxy-wars involved strategy development for countering insurgents. Vietnam, Malaya, Oman and Yemen were places were such wars took place. These insurgencies were very homogeneous in nature. Adversaries were not made up of highly mobile, agile groups of people brought together to fight for the advancement of a religion—like Al Qaeda. These insurgents were natives to the population, fighting to dominate a nation state, and achieve control over a population and associated indigenous natural resources. This is not necessarily the type of insurgency we face today; one based far more on heterogeneous societies made up from local indigenous populations, and those drawn in to fight what they perceive as occupiers leading a war against their religion and culture. In this regard, they have attempted to take the space vacated by the apparent failure of communism, giving people a creed which they can believe is an alternative to capitalism, and all its attendant failings.

A 21st Century Viewpoint

At the end of the Cold War some declared victory, heralding a new age of dominant capitalism. The free market and the associated perceived basic human desire to be free—and to express that freedom through the ballot box and democracy—were seen as building blocks of a global, harmonized society. It was the winning model, one that seemed natural for us to expect the rest of the world to wish to adopt.

However many societies were not ready to implement the changes needed to engage a democratic model for their societies. It was, and remains at the moment, a journey on which they will not readily embark. Too many underlying socio-cultural tensions exist as barriers to

progress along a route map to democracy. Cultures that have travelled very different trajectories in time are not easily aligned. In what are often pastoral societies, whose structures can readily be related to a pre-industrialized age—in what are today referred to as developed societies—dependence upon land (for food and a recognized place in society) and water are driving factors. These create the basis for societal friction, with its risks of turning into conflict.

The latter part of the 20th century saw the emergence of non-state actors, such as those involved in international terrorism and trans-national and organized crime. Nation states in some areas of the world were becoming increasingly less able to act cohesively as part of the emerging global society: Somalia and Afghanistan are good examples. Populations placed more allegiance to local customs and societal structures, such as tribal, clan and family links, than to being a member of a country. Loyalty to the nation state is some areas of the world diminished dramatically. Countries like Somalia are historically made up of a range of tribes, clans and sub-clans that routinely change their perspectives at a local level. Rivals one minute can become comrades the next. Groups form a shifting sand of alliances that are developed and fostered given the circumstances. Importantly, able as they to promote conflict and tensions, these structures also provide —somewhat paradoxically—routes to conflict resolution, as clan elders have the power to intervene and use established historical precedents for solving disputes.

This creates a complex backdrop against which forces conduct an ever-increasing range of military operations. These cover a wide-ranging spectrum from high intensity operations, through

British Commandos disembark on another counterinsurgency mission. (MOD UK)

power projection (the ultimate form of influence only based operation) to peace keeping and humanitarian relief activities, such as in the wake of a major regional disaster.

Given the pressures that may be associated with global climate change, including extreme events (such as Hurricane Katrina) of greater frequency and intensity, plus their potential to impact some of the world's least developed areas, military relief operations highly likely in the coming years. These will often occur suddenly, requiring a massive and speedy response. Civilian organizations simply do not have the immediate resources to operate on a global basis, so the spotlight naturally falls upon military forces to deliver the most urgently required aid. Being able to quickly understand a deployment area's underlying demographic, ethnic and anthropological structures will be a vital aspect of delivering a successful outcome.

Ethnic, Tribal and Clan Perspectives

Technology, through the ubiquitous Internet, has created a global society in which messages of grievances and hatred can be spread in seconds to a world-wide audience. In the 21st century this audience is highly structured—some might argue chaotic—and subject to a range of influences. Gone are the days

(Defense Link)

"Tribal, clan and family ties can be enduring..."

where in many countries loyalty to the state comes first. In fact, this is a very western style of thinking. Nationalism now appears at a much greater level of granularity, as exemplified in Somalia, Kosovo, Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia. Ethnic populations or societies are the key to the social fabric of such areas. Today we see an increasing sense of population fragmentation into ethno-religious and socio-cultural segments based upon anthropological ties, such as race, ethnicity, tribe, clan and family.

In cases where central governments are failing to deliver security and development, local societies with their clan and family-based kinship provide support, and ensure people are looked after in difficult times. To talk of influencing a population is therefore presumptive: in some places a single homogeneous population does not exist. The population is heterogeneous and made up from people who do not respect historical border agreements, preferring to see the world through a lens that fails to recognize that some countries even exist. In these cases, our approach to creating the conditions for developing

some form of influence needs to be more sophisticated. We need to understand the dangers we face in emphasizing kinetic based operations—and find a balance that is appropriate to local circumstances.

Delivering the appropriate mix of kinetic and non-kinetic (influence) based operations against such a dynamic backdrop requires intelligence material that enables us to map the complex myriad of societal interactions. These including vital historical perspectives on the origins of the segmentation, and disputes between the fragmented ethnic, tribal, clan and family structures. Only through gaining this level of granular knowledge—something that takes a great deal of time, effort and careful planning—can we conduct influence operations with some degree of certainty.

Effective influence operations in this context require a fine-grained analysis of the segmentation of these societies. We need to develop deep insights into the relationships and structures at the heart of this segmentation. We need to blend historical perspectives, some of which can be developed before deploying into theatre, with contemporary views. These are collected in the course of day-to-day operations.

We must inculcate the minds of *all* people engaged in military operations that each conversation they have with someone from a local population is an opportunity to gain insights into that society. Developing a long-term awareness of local society structure is vital. For example, who is the local religious leader within a village? Where did he train? What views does he hold? What is the relationship with the village elders? What kinship ties exist within the village? What measures have been taken in the past, such as inter-marriage, to resolve previous conflicts? What outstanding feuds and local rivalries exist? By what means does the village or qawm (clan) regulates itself? When did people last change allegiance? What pressures is the village under, and where might we be able to help?

We must place a long-term value on such perspectives. Tribal, clan and family ties can be enduring, as can blood feuds

and related disputes, which in places like Kosovo, Somalia and Afghanistan can last over several generations and be the source of lasting violence. In Somalia this is referred to as godob—the practice of vendetta killings. This is one means by which conflict is resolved. Another is by *Dia*-paying, which is traditionally measured in camels. All of these factors provide context insights, against which military operations can be undertaken—and have positive effects. The issue is how to collect the material that gives us the insights we need to chart our ways through a myriad of competing issues. This material needs to be regarded as a simple snapshot in time, while providing important historical perspectives.

Today's material collected by people on the ground may have little value. But in a different context, it can be tomorrow's vital piece of intelligence. Joining the dots together and completing what was thought to be a fragmented jigsaw puzzle can turn into a more cohesive and coherent basis for analysis and action. Understanding the way material can change in value over time is a vital precursor for effective influence operations.

Influence Operations – The Precursors

Conducting effective influence operations requires a number of things to be in place. First, there must be a sense of coupling between statements and actions taken at a strategic level, in terms of messages being disseminated to local audiences in the US and coalition partner countries, with those being made at the operational and tactical level. Local operations must be conducted on a consistent, defendable basis. Lack of consistency is something our adversaries will exploit. They are very alert to the media opportunities such approaches provide, such as unintended civilian casualties. That said, our forces need to be robust in defending their actions, when they have clearly taken all measures they can to avoid such unfortunate outcomes.

All too often we cede the moral high ground too easily to our adversaries,

believing we have already lost the argument. Using our values and beliefs we consider that some outcomes cannot be defended. This sends out powerful messages to societies that provide the backdrop to our operations. We do not realize the insidious impact upon local populations that our undefended actions might take, even if it appears we are defending something that is very difficult, such as collateral civilian casualties involving women and children. Our adversaries often conduct operations using women and children as human shields. Yet we rarely explain this to audiences in any great depth, for fear of making an argument appear too one- sided. Too often we judge their likely reactions by our own moralities, rather than through the lens with which they observe and react to events. There is often little symmetry in the ways populations and societies view such events.

In developing coherent operations we must also understand and recognize that literacy levels in many of these populations are low. This makes them especially vulnerable images on the Internet and the media. Many messages, like humiliation and repression, come across through images alone. These are very powerful, enduring, and readily reinforce perceptions that are already held. People take images and construct impressions with them easily; they do not need a great deal of explanation. Spoken words that try to articulate why accidental civilian deaths occurred are that much more difficult to get across to societies with low literacy levels.

Many pastoral societies do not need to develop reading and writing skills. They have done without these for years, if not centuries. So why develop them now? Promises of entering a new industrial age based on advanced education and higher skill levels do not go very far with societies who are struggling to feed their families on a daily basis. Add the likely impact of climate change to existing day-to-day pressures for these people, and it's understandable why they do not take the medium or long-term view.

Planning and conducting military operations that achieve a sustainable balance of kinetic and influence based operations is therefore difficult against this backdrop. Shared Situational Awareness will be an important and necessary precursor for command decisions on the ground. This will include demographic and societal awareness and insights. Commanders who are trained to operate in physical space, where maneuver on the ground and tempo are vital ingredients of success, will also need to be able to take decisions that include maneuvering in the cognitive space. Using this area to try and understand the adversaries' will and intensions also helps explain the extreme

Col John Boyd, father of the OODA Loop. (US Air Force)

forms of violence they may resort to in achieving their objectives. In this way military commanders can start to take decisions designed to have a balanced range of effects on the ground.

The OODA Loop

The vast majority of military people around the world are well aware of the work of Colonel John Boyd and the development of his Observe, Orient, Decide and Act (OODA) loop model. It is highly intuitive and therefore easy to understand. It also sits well with some of the teachings of well known

military writers such as Sun Tzu and Von Clausewitz.

Developed as a result of the Korean War and the success of the US F-86 Saberjet fighter against what was seen (on paper) to be the superior MiG-19 aircraft, it has been widely used to describe the ways in which major military warfare is conducted today. In both 1991 and 2003 the battlefield tempo in Iraq was seen as central to a successful and fast campaign. With the public ever more conscious of combat casualties, the need to prosecute the mission and deliver a successful outcome has never been more important. Wars need to be fought clinically and surgically with precision, tempo and regard for life, both of the people fighting and the local civilian population. While the applicability of the OODA loop to these classic symmetric engagements is clear and well established, it is reasonable to ask if it still has applicability when faced with an adversary well skilled in conducting asymmetric warfare.

The OODA loop is the paradigm of command that delivers the tempo required of contemporary maneuver warfare fought in a classical blue-on-red engagement, where the location of the enemy is relatively clear. Sensors based upon a variety of platforms, operating on the ground, air, space and underwater if required, are used to observe the battlefield (weather permitting). Military historians have provided a great deal of coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the advantages afforded to the United States and coalition forces operating with advanced sensor-based systems, such as JSTARS and Predator. These image- and radar-based sensor systems provide cues to commanders, revealing enemy dispositions. Often, these provide time sensitive targets for rapid attack, resulting in a disproportionate effect on the adversary.

Using Network Centric Capabilities, we can plan and execute operations at speeds based upon excellent, all around situational awareness. With specific capabilities such as Blue Force Tracking (BFT), commanders can look at where other coalition forces are located, and

make decisions quickly on synchronizing effects, sometimes without needing to refer to higher command authorities. Tempo on the ground is thus dominated by factors such as the weather, the rate at which forces consume materials, and the speed with which they can be resupplied.

What many people do not realize is the emphasis Colonel Boyd placed on the orient phase of the cycle. He placed specific attention to this part, weighting it differently. His contended that effort expended in getting into the right position to engage the enemy made the final decision to act more straightforward. With good situational awareness the decisions needed became obvious, and therefore commanders can make them quickly. This was a key reason that the F-86 could successfully engage the far superior MiG-19. However, Colonel Boyd's solution space was always kinetic and in the physical space.

The Cognitive OODA Loop & COIN

Contemporary COIN operations require commanders to carry out the OODA loop in both the physical and cognitive space. Colonel Boyd's emphasis upon the orient part of the cycle however still applies. Conventional military wisdom has us operating inside the OODA loop of the adversary. This is where we gain and maintain the initiative.

We can argue that a similar need exists in the cognitive domain. Anticipate the adversary and his moves, and you have the advantage. Above all, focus upon his will and intent and the places from which he derives his power—which in some cases is his ideology. When one is trying to influence an opponent, using what we refer to in the United Kingdom as Power Projection Operations (such as that conducted off the coast of Sierra Leone)—it is vital we get the OODA loop working in our adversary's cognitive space as well as the physical. So, the OODA loop still has its

attractions in the cognitive space, it's just that the speed of the loop may well be slower and more deliberate. This reflects the need to spend more time evaluating possible outcomes, given the complex socio-cultural and ethnic backdrop against which we're deploying influence operations. Of course, some of these may also be undesirable and unhelpful in achieving campaign objectives.

This underlines the already stated need to spend by far the greatest time in the orient phase of the cycle, analyzing potential influence actions and their possible outcomes. The cognitive space is where we might find the surprises and

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"Developing a long-term awareness of local society structure is vital."

difficult outcomes, hence the need to get it right—and spend time reflecting upon the range of potential outcomes from an action. It is also where we need to develop detailed insights into our adversary's will and intent. This requires detailed analysis and intelligence collection to avoid nasty surprises.

Nowhere might these surprises be more difficult to anticipate than in the kind of places where we are operating today. We have chosen to operate upstream to disrupt and deny sanctuary to our adversaries, all for good reasons. We are operating on their ground against their physical backdrops, as well as in cognitive and socio-cultural terms... of landscapes on which they can fight with great familiarity. They can also choose to fight when and where they feel. They

have some degrees of maneuver, but not a completely free hand.

Through asymmetric warfighting, they aim to wear down our will to see operations through to a successful conclusion. They perceive our unwillingness to sustain casualties as a weakness. Asymmetric warfare teaches people to fight where their enemies are weak, avoiding decisive engagements involving massed forces at all costs. Their aim is to engage us over the long term, forcing withdrawal as casualties and body bags arrive home. Their watchwords are *attrition, patience* and *time*. Ours are *speed, reducing casualties* and *haste*. Given the emerging need to develop a more sophisticated approach to influence operations, our watchwords are at best, unhelpful.

Against this backdrop politicians talk of sustained engagement, using language indicating a willingness to be in theater for the long term. They argue we need to take the casualties and continue to take the fight to the enemy upstream. In referring to the military operations in this way, they provide an important strategic backdrop for planning COIN activities over the short and medium term. This is an important part of sending messages to the members of the local societies that we are committed to staying, to give them a more secure environment in which to live.

Paradoxically, while we send out such messages at a strategic level there is little apparent linkage between this and messages and operations conducted at the tactical level. These are often of a very short-term nature. Moreover we sometimes lack the appreciation of the value of information and material that we collect in the course of these operations, and its potential benefits in the medium term. There seems to be a culture of "if it is not useful in the next few days, we may as well not worry about it." Given the enduring nature of relationships, including tribal, clan, sub-clan and

family ties in such societies, this is a very short term and almost myopic viewpoint. This is a viewpoint we must address.

Our military operations are also conducted, for the foreseeable future, with coalition partners. These may well be coalitions of the willing, where the United Nations forges groups of countries—sometimes not ready bedfellows—into a structure that helps deploy troops to undertake a variety of duties. In these coalitions there are huge opportunities to send the right signals to a local population, and the associated need to be wary of ethnic tensions that might arise through coalitions where underlying socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds may not happily mix. Getting this balance right is another key element of planning and developing coherent, cohesive military operations with an appropriate influence component.

Conclusions

This article set out to discuss the issues we face today in developing influence operations at the right level of sophistication, one that allows them to positively contribute to the on-going engagements. We've explored the backdrop against which such operations are conducted, and highlighted the difficulty of heterogeneous societies that have little respect for nation states, central authorities and their institutions. We need to affect local political and socio-cultural structures, while understanding how underlying socio-anthropological structures are a vital pre-requisite to successful influence operations.

It is vital that we consider ways of gaining access to those audiences, while respecting age old customs, such as the role of the Shura (local council) in some societies. Understanding how it works and is able to exert its influence is an essential ingredient to local success. No quick fixes are available, but we do need to develop a long-term strategy. We must also recognize that our views of needing all countries to become democracies, as after all democracies do not fight each other (!), is ambitious.

Sometimes societies will simply not be ready to move that far in 'quick time,' measured in years or decades, in contrast with their history. Though we may believe it to be an essential element in denying areas of failed states to terrorist groups—a key component in the Global War on Terror—we may have to leave intact some elements of the way these societies regulate themselves, even if these elements are not immediately compatible with our own values and beliefs. After all, European culture took many hundreds of years to develop.

If our politicians mean it when they say we are involved in a theater for a sustained period of engagement, then this article argues that we had better develop far greater insights into the history and anthropology of an area. These are the *sine qua non* of the effective deployment of non-kinetic effects. They will help us achieve our longer term goals of increasing security and offering nation states a better future—even if all that means is that they are left alone to get on with their lives. ✐